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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 000892

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SUBJECT: MGLE01: ELECTORAL REFORM COMMISSION MEMBER
DEFENDS HIS AND COLLEAGUES' WORK

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Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).
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SUMMARY

¶1. (C) In a 3/17 meeting, electoral reform commission member Zouheir Chokr expressed surprise at the resignation of two of his colleagues but called their insistence on a 13-district electoral map unjustified and contrary to the spirit of the Taif Agreement. He claimed that the nine-district plan favored by most of the commission's members made for equally effective Christian representation in Parliament, without any of the 13-district plan's drawbacks of promoting sectarianism and undermining the goals of Taif. Chokr attempted to favorably contrast the approach of his own confessional group, the Shi'a, with that of that of the two resigned commission members, the Maronites. End summary.

BAROUD AND TABET'S PLAN LACKED THE SPIRIT OF '89

¶2. (C) Emboffs met for the first time with Zouheir Chokr (pronounced "shocker"), a member of the national commission charged with reforming Lebanon's electoral law, on March 17. Chokr, who was recently appointed president of the Lebanese University, is one of the commission's two Shi'a Muslims and is reportedly close to Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri. He said that the electoral reform process reached its current impasse as a result of the unjustified insistence of its two Maronite members, Ziad Baroud and Michel Tabet, on "mono-confessional" -- that is, overwhelmingly Christian or Muslim -- electoral districts. This, Chokr said, ran counter to the spirit of the 1989 Taif Agreement.

¶3. (C) Chokr described how he and three other commission members -- all experts in constitutional law -- spent several months explaining to their fellow commission members the superiority of elections decided on a proportional basis. Proportionality, he argued, provides the fairest possible representation to all communities. He praised the nine-district electoral scheme, with all races decided on a proportional basis, that a majority of commission members had agreed was the best option.

CHOKR ON DISTRICTS: NINE IS ENOUGH

¶ 14. (C) Chokr described how three fellow commission members -- the two Maronite members, Baroud and Tabet, as well as the Greek Catholic member, FAYEZ HAJJ CHAHINE -- rejected the nine-district scheme. As an alternative, they had pressed for a 13-district scheme, on the grounds that more and smaller districts would make for fairer and more effective representation of the Christian community in Parliament.

¶ 15. (C) Chokr rejected this argument, saying that he and the other advocates of nine districts had gone to extra lengths to accommodate Christian concerns. The boundaries of the nine proposed districts had been drawn, he said, to separate predominantly Muslim areas from other areas. This would minimize the number of Christian seats in Parliament (64 out of a total of 128) decided by Muslim majorities, a prominent Christian concern. For example, predominantly-Shi'a Nabatiyeh was separated from the rest of southern Lebanon, with its significant Christian and Druze minorities. Ba'albak -- also predominantly Shi'a -- was separated from the rest of the Biqa'a Valley. The predominantly-Sunni Akkar was likewise separated from the rest of northern Lebanon, he said.

13 DISTRICTS: NO BENEFITS BUT EXTRA PROBLEMS

¶ 16. (C) The plan promoted by Hajj Chahine, Baroud, and Tabet offered no special benefits to Christians, Chokr told us, because approximately the same number of Christian seats in Parliament -- between 54 and 56 -- would effectively be decided by Christian voters, whether there were nine districts or 13. Election modeling exercises carried out by the commission had determined this, he said.

¶ 17. (C) While 13 districts offered no particular advantages,

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Chokr continued, they did have some serious drawbacks. Their boundaries were drawn in a way that would reinforce sectarianism. A 13-district scheme would do nothing to advance progress towards the non-confessional system envisioned by the Taif Agreement. Indeed, in the absence of strong, cross-confessional political parties, it would set things back. (Chokr pointed out more than once to us that he advised former Speaker of Parliament Hussein Husseini in the drafting of the Taif Agreement in 1989.)

HOPING THAT BAROUD AND TABET RETURN

¶ 18. (C) His criticism of Baroud and Tabet aside, Chokr expressed hope that the two could be persuaded to re-join the commission. He was surprised that they had gone so far as to resign. The two "are not known to be fanatics," he said. None of the commission members, to Chokr's knowledge, had come under pressure from their own confessional groups over the content of the draft law.

¶ 19. (C) However, Chokr understood that Baroud had made an effort to coordinate closely with the Maronite Patriarch and various political groups on the drafting of the electoral law. He noted that neither the Patriarch, nor the "Qornet Shehwan Gathering" of Maronite politicians close to him, nor Sa'ad Hariri's Future Movement are favorably disposed to proportional electoral systems, as if this might explain Baroud's eventual decision to resign.

SHI'AS ARE DIFFERENT (?)

¶ 110. (C) Chokr attempted to contrast what he considered a maximalist approach to defending communal interests on Baroud's and Tabet's part with his own. He suggested that the Shi'a community could have insisted on three seats on the

commission, rather than the two they ended up with. The point of the exercise from the Shi'a community's point of view, however, was to come up with a good law, not simply maximize a communal share of the pie, he suggested.

¶11. (C) Even though most in the Shi'a community would have preferred five electoral districts, Chokr claimed not to have experienced any pressure as a result of going along with the nine-district plan. He ascribed this to a tendency among Shi'as to favor solving national problems through consensus.

COMMENT

¶12. (C) In a separate conversation with us on March 20, Ziad Baroud offered some contrast to Chokr's remarks. Anyone who tells us that there is no difference in the effectiveness of Christian representation between the nine-district and 13-district schemes, he said, "is a liar." As for Chokr's impartiality, Baroud claimed that the presidency of the Lebanese University had been a reward for serving Speaker Berri's interests on the commission. Finally, the idea that five electoral districts was ever an option was false, Baroud said.

FELTMAN